

SOME ITALIAN ELEMENTS IN THE CHORAL
PRACTICE OF *SAMSON AGONISTES*

BY

MARGUERITE LITTLE

B.Ed., Eastern Illinois State Teachers College, 1943

A.M., University of Illinois, 1944

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH
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SOME ITALIAN ELEMENTS IN THE CHORAL PRACTICE OF *SAMSON AGONISTES*

The resemblances which Milton's *Samson Agonistes* shows to Greek tragedy have concerned many scholars, while the possible influence of Italian neo-classical forms has received relatively less attention. In the brief essay on tragedy which Milton prefixed to *Samson Agonistes* he says that he has introduced the chorus in the manner of the Greeks and the Italians, and he draws no distinction between the Italian usage and the Greek usage. It has been my purpose in this study to examine the uses of the chorus in Italian tragedies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in order to see the possible relationships between Italian choral practice and Milton's choral practice in *Samson Agonistes*. I have attempted to gather examples of the main phases of Italian neo-classical tragedy from Trissino through the middle of the seventeenth century and to determine the features of choral practice which are most common in those plays.

A study of choral practice in Italian neo-classical tragedies and of the general dramatic practice of which it was a part must take into account the following factors: the correlation which the Renaissance critics made between Greek theory and practice and Latin theory and practice; the popularity of the Senecan form; the effect of the almost conventional use of some devices; and the popularity of the musical drama which grew up toward the end of the sixteenth century.

As a result of the correlation of Greek theory and practice with Latin theory and practice, Italian neo-classical tragedies were written in acts and the chorus was conventionally used to mark the end of an act. Renaissance theory offers authority for ending the first act either with the entrance of the chorus or with the first choral song after the entrance of the chorus; both types of division are reflected in Italian choral practice. The choral songs between the acts contain at least thirty lines ordinarily and most often contain between fifty and sixty lines. The choral song at the end of the fifth act is usually quite short, however.

The chief functions of the chorus among Italian practitioners of neo-classical tragedy were those of giving advice, sympathizing with the characters of the play, and mourning the adversities of the main character. The chorus does not participate to any marked

extent in the action of the play in most cases and it is ordinarily not represented as concerned in the action of the play from the standpoint of its own fortunes. Similarly, its participation in dialogue is somewhat restricted, often markedly so. The chorus is seldom highly characterized. Its function of lamenting events is frequently performed without the aid of any other character. Sometimes a special chorus is introduced to assist.

The most common subject for the choral songs was the difficulties and afflictions attendant upon the mortal state, with much moralizing thereupon. The choral songs between the acts are also often devoted to love and marriage, to prayer, or to the character of one of the main personages of the play. While the subject matter of the choral songs is suggested by the play, the remarks are generalized into comments of a universal nature. The detached quality of the choral song is often most marked.

The chorus was frequently used for purely ornamental purposes; it is common, especially in late Italian tragedy, for several choral groups, either speaking or non-speaking, which have very little connection with the play to be introduced. A musical origin may be assigned to many of these usages; all are manifestations of "spectacle." The term *semichorus* is used to refer to ornamental added choruses, rather than to a division of the main chorus.

Almost any feature of Greek choral usage that one wishes to seek may be found in some Italian tragedy. Such imitations are not always a part of the Italian tradition, occurring either infrequently or in isolated usage. Such features as have been noted above are so common in Italian choral practice as to form a conventional practice among the Italians. It should be pointed out that many of these characteristics are present in Italian tragedies from the very beginning of Italian "regular" tragedy.

The choruses among the Italians use blank verse in dialogue for the most part, although some of their dialogal utterances may be varied with short lines and may have rhyme. The choral songs most frequently have rhyme, and contain a large proportion of seven-syllable lines. They are usually but not always stanzaic; and the most common pattern is the canzone form.

I have shown that Milton's plans for tragedies in the Trinity College Manuscript (tentatively dated 1641-2) show marked Italian influence. The sketches are not always complete enough to show many specific characteristics of choral usage. The chorus was certainly intended to be used to end the act and to end the play. The

first act was to contain the entering choral song and was not to be ended by the entering speech of the chorus. More than one chorus was specifically indicated for the play which was to deal with Sodom and is implicit in the sketch entitled "Abram from Morea." The sketches indicate an emphasis on spectacle and show signs of the influence of musical forms. The choruses were to express joy or grief as the play called for it and were to sympathize with the other actors.

In view of Milton's reference to five acts in the brief essay on tragedy which he prefixed to *Samson Agonistes*, we are justified in thinking of the play in terms of acts. The choral song again ends the act divisions and concludes the play, as it was to have done in the "Adam unparadiz'd" sketch which is the most fully developed of the sketches in the Trinity College Manuscript. The first act clearly ends with the second choral song and contains the entering chorus. I have also shown that the fourth act probably ends with the longer, generalized song after the departure of Harapha rather than with the very short particularized prayer of the chorus after the departure of Samson. The latter division has been adopted by some editors, thus obscuring a step in the processes of Samson's mind—such processes constituting the action of the play.

Milton introduces a non-speaking chorus of women in *Samson Agonistes*, the use of which is purely ornamental and is reminiscent of the elements of spectacle in his earlier sketches. In view of the extensive ornamental use of the chorus among the Italians and the strong Italian influence apparent in the Trinity College Manuscript, it seems likely that Milton was subject to Italian influence on this point.

When the chorus laments Samson's death in the last act of the play, the clearly ornamental device of the semichorus is used, and the lamentation is confined to the chorus as Manoa's words immediately following make clear. The resemblance here is close to the Italian usage of a special chorus to assist in lamenting or rejoicing, and the use of rhyme in a way which suggests the canzone form strengthens the possibility of Italian influence. The confining of the lament to the chorus is well-established in Italian tradition. In the absence of a close parallel in Greek drama, the Italian influence may be regarded as perhaps the most pertinent.

The speaking chorus in *Samson Agonistes* consists of Hebrew men; these men advise, sympathize with, and lament for Samson. Although the chorus makes one attempt to influence Samson's

decision, it does not participate in the action of the play to any marked extent. The proportion of the lines given to the chorus to the total number of lines in the play is large, but most of these lines are contained in the choral songs, not only those between the acts but in the songs of the chorus entering and lamenting. The chorus does not participate to any marked extent in dialogue. The chorus is characterized in the sense that its utterances consist of sentiments appropriate to its station in life; it is not, however, represented as being concerned in the outcome of the play from its own standpoint. We lose sight of the fact that as Hebrews the men in the chorus should be interested in Samson's fate as affecting their own condition of servitude. All these features are a part of common Italian practice, although the female chorus was more frequently used in Italian tragedy.

The choral songs are related to the action of the play in the sense that they are in each case closely connected with the central character or with some event in the play. The entering speech is devoted to Samson's exploits and the contrast between his present servitude and his former glory. The tone is moral. The second song of the chorus is not of this particularized nature. This song arises from the previous dialogue on Samson's misfortunes, but the material is generalized into a comment upon the justice of God. The same theme is apparent in the song which follows the interview with Manoa. The connection is close to the previous dialogue, but is in itself a general comment upon the difficulties of the afflicted combined with an address to God upon the inscrutability of his ways. The song after the Dalila episode is again somewhat detached in its general comments upon woman and marriage and the song after the departure of Harapha is even more generalized. The detachment shown in the chorus's comments between the acts is completely within the Italian tradition. The content of all the choral songs stands close to the common types of subject matter in Italian choral practice, except for the song about heroic virtue after the departure of Harapha. This does not present a common theme.

When the chorus speaks in dialogue, Milton has used blank verse. The songs of the chorus are made up of short and long lines and all of the songs of the chorus with the exception of the one following the departure of Harapha contain some rhyme. In some cases, as in the lament of the chorus-semichorus, there are suggestions of the canzone form. The short moralizing song at the end

of the play is completely rhymed. These aspects of form, taken in conjunction with the form of the entire play, are strongly suggestive of Italian influence, as are the stanzaic divisions of some of the choruses, especially the divisions of the second and fourth choral songs. The length of the choral songs is in every case consistent with the length of songs in Italian choral practice as are likewise the lengths of the chorus's speeches in dialogue.

The presence of the chorus on the stage throughout the play is a not uncommon Italian practice; however, such usage is more dependent upon the manner of handling the plot than upon anything else and is not a use to be determined without reference to the plot.

The choral usage in *Samson Agonistes* stands close to Italian practice in almost every point. The use of the chorus to end the act; the form of the choral songs with their long and short lines and their use of rhyme; the ornamental use of the chorus in the lament and in the introduction of the mute chorus of women—none of these points may be fully explained upon the basis of Greek example, but are to be explained upon the basis of Italian example. Furthermore, Milton's choral usage has been found to be close to Italian tradition in almost every point. It is likely that such features as the limited participation in dialogue and action and the content and detached quality of the choral songs owe much to Italian example.

Many of the features which the choral usage in *Samson Agonistes* shares with Italian practice are to be found also in Greek practice. In view of the derivatory nature of Italian tragedy this is to be expected. It should be borne in mind that Milton in his essay on tragedy almost identifies Greek choral usage with Italian. Characteristics of choral usage in *Samson Agonistes* which are shown by both Greek and Italian plays should be referred to both traditions rather than to one or the other alone. We should bear in mind that probably Milton was thoroughly familiar with both traditions and that he was no slave to any tradition. In view of Milton's reference to the Italians in his essay, in view of the strong Italian influence apparent in the Trinity College Manuscript, and finally in view of those aspects of choral usage in *Samson Agonistes* which must be referred to the Italians for explanation, it seems most probable that Italian example should be admitted to have had a shaping influence upon Milton's entire choral usage in his tragedy.

VITA

Marguerite Little was born July 2, 1922, near Ramsey, Illinois. After attending grammar school and high school at Paris, Illinois, she entered Eastern Illinois State Teachers College, Charleston, Illinois. The degree of Bachelor of Education was conferred upon her by that institution in June, 1943. In October, 1943, she entered the University of Illinois as a scholar in English; the degree of Master of Arts was conferred upon her in 1944. She continued at the University of Illinois as a fellow in English for four semesters. Since April of 1946, she has been employed as a Research Assistant in the Graduate School.

